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ABSTRACT

The Staff Development for School Improvement (SDSI) program, which is part of the National Center on Teaching and Learning at Eastern Michigan University, is a unique experiment in school and university collaboration. The program, which provides college faculty members as staff development facilitators to school personnel, is in its sixth year of operation. Based on the premise that ownership (by administrators and teachers) is essential, the program has flourished because, as participants conclude, school staffs have the responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating their own staff development. The essence of the SDSI program is constructive change in a school through shared decision making at the school building or department level. SDIS involves six steps: (1) awareness, readiness, and commitment; (2) interactive needs assessment; (3) the plan and its approval; (4) implementation; (5) reporting and evaluation; and (6) adoption. In its six years of operation, SDSI has affected 66 schools in 20 districts. More than 1,200 teachers, influencing over 40,000 K-12 students, have been involved. Each step of the program is outlined in detail, and findings and observations on five variables that affect the success of the process are offered: (1) the presence of a supportive principal, (2) a broadly representative steering committee that meets regulary, (3) weekly facilitator visits to the school, (4) regular contact between the steering committee and the rest of the school staff, and (5) bi-weekly facilitator meetings. (JMK)

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: FIELD TESTING A MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The primary emphasis of the Staff Development for School Improvement Program (SDSI) is school improvement, not inservice education for the gain of individual professional personnel. The focus is on developing better programs for students by supporting the work of teachers and administrators in improving curriculum, developing more effective teaching strategies, and creating better learning climates.

SDSI is based on the premise that classroom teachers can best address their needs, identify their own priorities, and plan a program for resolving their needs and priorities. The success of the model can be attributed mainly to teacher ownership and the use of a clearly defined six-step process. Faculty from four of the colleges at Eastern Michigan University act as facilitators - process consultants - to each school project.

INTRODUCTION

Excellence in education and improvement of the nation's schools is a widely discussed contemporary topic. Current attention is focused heavily on basic skills while other elements, such as the learning climate and the school as a workplace, tend to be overlooked. One group that receives the greatest amount of criticism with regard to excellence is the teaching force. Teachers, both public school and university, are often characterized as aging and out of date with respect to their knowledge of subject matter, instructional techniques, and technological innovations. Staff development offers a promising way to improve and update that teaching force; thus, effecting an upswing in excellence.

The Staff Development for School Improvement (SDSI) program, which is part of the National Center on Teaching and Learning (NCTL) at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) is a unique experiment in school university collaboration. The program, which links faculty from several of its colleges as facilitators to school personnel, is in its sixth year of operation. Based on the premise that ownership (by administrators and teachers) is essential, the program has flourished because, as participants conclude, the school staffs have the responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating their own staff development. The essence of the SDSI program is constructive change in a school through shared decision making at the school building or department level. SDSI is based on five assumptions:

1. the school building is the key unit to effect constructive change,
2. the school staff must be actively involved in determining how change (improvement) will occur,
3. ownership of and commitment to the change process by the school staff is essential,

4. change contributes to an improved learning climate - improvement of the instructional performance of teachers and the performance of students,
5. staff development contributes to school improvement.

The process of staff development utilized at EMU is collaborative- it involves cooperation among the school staff, local districts, intermediate school district personnel, the Michigan Department of Education staff, and personnel from Eastern Michigan University. An important feature of the collaboration is the involvement of university faculty acting as facilitators (process consultants). The Michigan legislature supports the program financially, thus enabling EMU to employ facilitators, provide money to schools for staff development, and support the administration of the program.

The vehicle for change is a process involving six steps. It was originally used in Michigan's Taylor School District. Experience has altered some of the procedures within the steps but the basic six steps remain.

Preliminary Steps

When the SDSI program first began school districts learned about it through individuals in the State Department of Education, the University, the intermediate school district, or the local district. When district personnel indicated an interest in the program, a SDSI program representative followed up with a presentation to the district's central administration and a representative of the local teachers' organization, seeking commitment of both the administration and the teachers' organization - an essential step if the program is to succeed. Once approval of both groups was obtained, the central administration selected candidate schools for involvement.

Following introduction and acceptance by the district and identification

of candidate schools, the university facilitator (and frequently the district staff development coordinator or the SDSI program coordinator) met with the principals of the candidate schools to outline the requirements and explain the potential of the program. This gave principals a chance to raise questions about the process and evaluate its potential contribution to school improvement. The principal would then decide whether he or she would be interested in having the staff participate. If so, the principal arranged for a presentation about the program to the school staff. Agreeing to arrange a presentation did not, however, constitute a commitment to participate.

While the school selection process was going on university facilitators were recruited and trained. During the year of SDSI's operation under NCTL (1981) seven faculty were selected from volunteers who expressed interest in working with the program. Five of the original seven are in their third year; three continue as facilitators and two share responsibility for coordinating the program. The current facilitators are actively involved in recruiting and selection of colleagues to fill facilitator vacancies.

Once schools were selected the six steps of the process were implemented. Those steps are explained below:

The Six-Step Process

Step 1 - Awareness, Readiness, and Commitment

A team comprised of the SDSI or district staff development coordinator conducts an initial session with the school staff to explain the program, purpose, process, expected benefits, and probable outcomes. After exploring the potential and requirements of the program, the staff decides whether to participate (voting is by secret ballot). Seventy-five percent of the staff must agree to participate for the program to be initiated.

Step 2 - Interactive Needs Assessment

A consultant, skilled in the interactive process and assisted by the facilitator, helps the staff identify the needs they consider critical, reach concensus on the priority needs, and establish the goal they wish to address. Factors that may influence or interfere with accomplishing the goal are identified. Strategies for reaching the goal are generated. After the goal is selected a planning committee is chosen to write a proposal.

Step 3 - The Plan and Its Approval

With continuous input from the rest of the staff and using the ideas generated at the needs assessment, the planning committee develops a written plan for the staff development project. Most often this is done in a series of work sessions with assistance from the university facilitator. While the design of the plan may assume different forms, each plan must include (1) a statement of the priority goal, (2) project objectives, (3) action strategies (activities), (4) expected outcomes (change/improvement), (5) time lines and a schedule of events, (6) evaluation procedures, (7) human and material resources needed, and (8) a detailed budget. Constant feedback with the staff occurs during the writing so that final approval is a foregone conclusion and the plan can be put into action immediately.

Step 4 - Implementation

In the implementation phase the goals and objectives presented in the plan are acted upon. Activities often include workshops, on the job study, curriculum development in a content field, conference attendance, visitations to observe successful practice, analysis of new teaching techniques, and the use of outside consultants: all must be related to the staff development plan. Monitoring progress and communicating with other mem-

bers of the staff is the function of an elected steering committee. Because the plan describes what implementation should be, it helps in the evaluation of the project.

Step 5 - Reporting and Evaluation

Evaluation is continuous and is designed to determine the degree to which the goals and objectives are being accomplished. Five categories of outcomes are:

1. the knowledge, skills, and attitude change;
2. changes in behavior caused by the new knowledge, skills, and attitudes;
3. changes in curriculum, management, and school organization resulting from the new learnings;
4. changes in student knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior due to new teacher awareness; and
5. impact on the community.

The school staff are responsible for evaluation of their own project with assistance from the facilitator. At the end of the year, both the qualitative (teacher perceptions) and quantitative (numbers of events held, numbers participating, etc.) information collected is put together in the final report as an assessment of accomplishment.

Step 6 - Adoption

Adoption has two components; 1) adoption of the process as an ongoing procedure by the school staff for staff development activities, and 2) adoption of the improvements, such as instituting the new curriculum and/or adopting the newly developed materials. When a project has been completed a concluding reassessment of needs is conducted. Examination of

the effectiveness of the project usually leads to the identification of new needs. The new needs become the beginning of another staff development project, a new plan is written, and the process is repeated.

Impact of the Program

In its six years of operation, SDSI has affected 66 schools in 20 districts. More than 1200 teachers influencing over 40,000 K - 12 students have been involved. Teachers have engaged in staff development activities which include communication and school climate, computer literacy for teachers and students, special strategies for identifying and the teaching of the gifted and talented, development of screening procedures for kindergarten and special needs students, revised curriculum, new reporting systems, instructional skills, new discipline procedures, and creating ways to involve the parents in the school program.

The activities went beyond what is traditionally thought of as staff development. Yet each change held hope for school improvement.

Teachers recognized that the process brought about changes apart from the accomplishments of their stated goals. Communication and working relationships improved. A new feeling of camaraderie and professionalism developed within the staffs. Teachers talked more about how they could improve their teaching, the success of their students, and their working relationships with school staff, students, and parents. With the power to affect change in the school environment came what appears to be a greater sense of identity and a better image, both individually and collectively. The commitment, motivation and involvement of the school staff led to improvement in the school as a workplace and a learning place.

Changes were noted in the central players in the program - the teachers

and the principals - but the university facilitators also changed. Being intimately involved through each step of the process and participating in many of the activities affected the way they viewed teaching and teachers. Interacting with the school staff in a different role than the traditional role of short term content expert required the facilitator to draw upon inner resources and tap into resources outside of themselves. They developed their interpersonal skills and learned to facilitate group process. Sharing experiences with fellow facilitators forged a strong collegial bond. The new challenge of working together provided stimulation - and the bonus of a support group of colleagues.

Observations

While the usual research methods were not used to analyze these data, we are able to draw several conclusions from observations and statements collected from teachers and principals in the participating schools, facilitators, and others. Some of the more significant findings and observations are explained in the following text.

First, and perhaps most important to the success of the process, is the presence of a supportive principal. This support must be active and includes such things as being a member of and attending the steering committee meetings regularly, providing time in faculty meetings for project updates, and giving continued verbal support to the program.

Second, in schools where the process is working well a steering committee, broadly representative of the school structure, meets regularly (once a week is best). Meeting regularly maintains the momentum of the project and sustains teacher ownership. Minutes of the meetings assist in evaluating the progress of the project.

Third, facilitator visits to the school at least weekly are important to a project's success. It is best when the facilitator can meet with the steering committee regularly. The facilitator acts as a catalyst, clarifies the steps of the process, and links the school to resources within the university and other agencies.

Fourth, it is essential that the steering committee maintain regular contact with the rest of the school staff. This can be done through publishing the minutes of steering committee meetings, involving other staff on sub-committees, regular reporting in staff meetings, and open invitations to attend steering committee meetings. A concerted effort to contact and involve other staff strengthens commitment and ownership of the program.

Fifth, the bi-weekly facilitator meetings are important to the overall success of this model. Meeting regularly promotes camaraderie and collegiality, especially as the purpose of the meetings are to share the experience of working with schools, exchange resources, and review policies. These meetings provide a forum for discussing philosophical issues related to staff development and school improvement.

Conclusions

Three years experience with the process previously outlined is hardly sufficient time to conclude that the project is the best possible solution to the excellence problem. However, we can conclude that the process has promise and is a worthwhile tool in this national outcry concerning public school quality. The process is slow and deliberate and, therefore, may be overlooked in our press to find a "quick fix." It is our belief that there are no quick fixes and there is no panacea. All significant improvements will take time and, we believe, must address the problem of staff

improvement. This process addresses, in a way that involves staff, that problem. Thus far it appears to work. And because it is sufficiently modifiable to engender trust, thus continuous improvement on the part of participants, we believe it to be a viable partial answer to the excellence problem. As a bit of serendipity, it just may improve university faculty at the same time.

Reference

Edelfelt, Roy A. (ed.), Staff Development for School Improvement: An Illustration; Ypsilanti, National Center on Teaching and Learning, Eastern Michigan University, 1983.